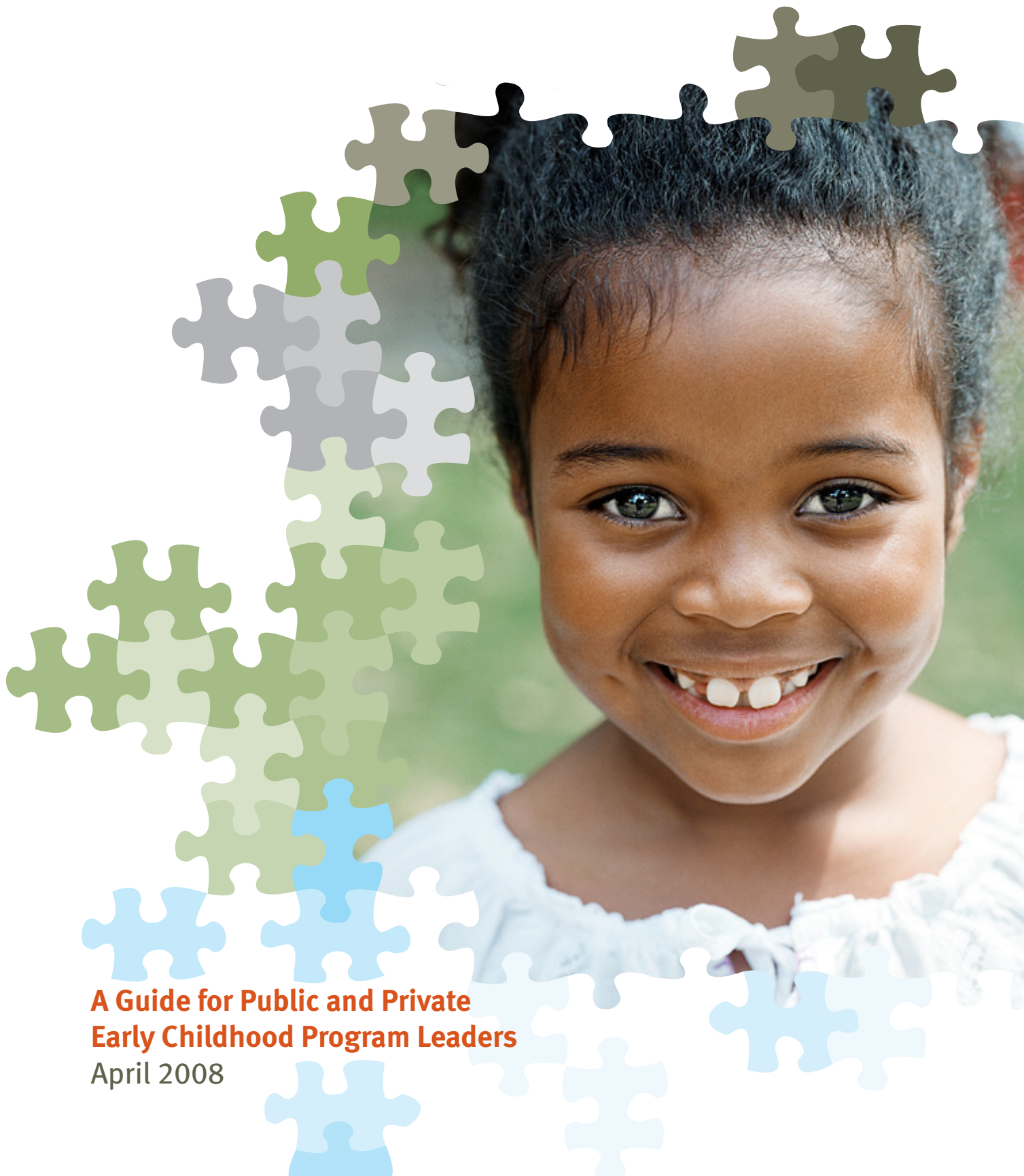# Solving the Preschool Puzzle

Working together to provide high quality early learning for young children

A Guide for Public and Private Early Childhood Program Leaders

April 2008

Acknowledgements

Many individuals have contributed to the production of this guide, providing knowledge and experience from varied perspectives and constituencies, given in the spirit of collaboration and for the benefit of Virginia's young children.

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Solving the Preschool Puzzle
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Early childhood educators and advocates recognize that there has been **no time like the present** for advancing the field of early childhood education and high quality learning opportunities for young children and families.

The nexus of brain research and economic cost-benefit analyses in the past decade has produced a strong body of evidence, highlighting the potential return on investment in early childhood development. The case for early learning compels public and private leaders to plan strategically for children to have access to high quality early childhood development, resulting in long-term positive effects.

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, Governor Timothy M. Kaine has articulated a clear vision of expanding access to high quality early learning for children through various strategies. In doing so, he not only has increased the likelihood for Virginia's young children to be prepared for success in school and in life, but also has proposed investments that stand to strengthen the economic vitality of the Commonwealth.

Reflecting the Start Strong Council's findings, access, quality, and accountability are integral to the proposed plan for pre-K. Because preschool is a worthy investment in human capital at the most fertile time of brain development in life, attention has been focused on strategies for increasing access while at the same time keeping quality as a top priority. In all studies of success, features of high quality are evident as key ingredients.

The picture of Virginia's successful system has begun to emerge. True to Governor Kaine's original vision, the system taking shape is a network – one characterized by partnership between public schools and private providers. It is a web that is woven with strong support connecting a sound, focused state infrastructure to local leadership displayed through advisory councils (sometimes called "school readiness councils" or "early childhood councils"). These local councils are made up of diverse leaders who together craft systemic preschool plans that meet the comprehensive needs of children and take advantage of unique strengths of each community.

The successful system utilizes varied and innovative financing mechanisms to increase access in steady, thoughtful steps. Both direct and indirect investments are critical to achieving

a preschool network that upholds quality standards and is increasingly accessible to four-year-olds in the Commonwealth.

Most of all, the preschool network is one that achieves quality standards that determine its ability to prepare children with school readiness skills that set them on a path of success. The network supports and is supported by a strong, capable early childhood workforce.

The network supports and is supported by a mechanism to measure, display, encourage, and reward quality in both public and private settings. The network supports and is supported by high quality options for parents, communicating with families and engaging them as consumers and as primary stewards of their child's growth and development. The network supports and is supported by communities, engaging business, education, philanthropic and human services leaders in making investments that yield strong benefits for children and families, schools, communities, the workforce, and the economy.

The preschool network has a solid commitment to articulating clear goals, measuring progress, and communicating results. Virginia's preschool system will be informed by these findings and evaluations to guide its movement toward its goals of increased access and quality.

To expand access to high quality preschool for four-year-olds, the Governor introduced a proposal in December of 2007 **to build on the existing and effective Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI).** Like VPI, the plan placed an emphasis on serving at-risk students first. Also like VPI, local school divisions and local governments would remain the primary fiscal agent for providing pre-kindergarten programs in their communities.

However, the proposal sought to make several important changes to VPI to allow more students to access high-quality pre-K.

First, more four-year-olds would be eligible to participate by changing the allocation formula at the state level from free-lunch eligibility (130% of the federal poverty level) to free-and-reduced-lunch eligibility (185% of the federal poverty level). This change would mean that nearly 30,000 four-year-olds will be eligible to participate, up from 19,000 who are eligible today. (It should be noted that the number of allocated "slots" is based on this formula; eligibility criteria for the actual enrollment of children is determined at the local level. Criteria typically include eligibility for free and reduced price lunch, limited English proficiency, developmental delays, and other risk factors.)

Some of the currently eligible children are not able to access pre-K programs today because not all localities participate fully in the state's VPI program. The plan was designed to address the two most-frequently cited reasons for a locality's choosing not to use all the available state-funded slots: money and space.

The plan proposed funding to assist localities in providing high-quality pre-K by allowing them to claim a state match for their expenses between the current per-pupil rate of $5700 and $6790, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) estimate of the average amount spent in existing VPI programs. The plan would cap the composite index calculation, ensuring that the state pays at least half of the cost of providing pre-K, depending on local ability to pay. The plan would allow localities more flexibility in providing the local match, including charitable or business contributions. According to the proposal, every locality would be eligible for funding for at least one pre-K classroom.

The plan would expand the use of private providers in delivering pre-K to at-risk four-year-olds. Localities would be required to partner with local private providers for at least 10% of any new slots created under the expanded program. The plan encouraged the development of local early childhood councils for better public-private cooperation and comprehensive efforts to serve young children. Councils have the ability to facilitate the integration of all valued partners in a community's preschool network: public schools, Head Start programs, and private child care and preschools.

In addition, interested private providers would have been able to apply directly to the state for any balance of funds to serve at-risk children not served by a local public-private partnership. The staff of the VPI office would have been augmented to provide the resources to do more outreach and technical advice to both public and private providers.

It's not enough to simply increase the number of settings for preschool delivery. The preschool network must provide high quality, comprehensive services. The proposal sought to address these features in three ways: the use of the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), additional funds for scholarships to strengthen the early childhood workforce, and funds for local grants through the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation.

The QRIS would measure and assign a quality rating from one to five stars for any program, public or private, that receives state pre-K funds. In addition, providers who do not use state funds, but wish to be QRIS-rated, would be allowed to participate. The QRIS system is both a measurement tool and an improvement tool, offering technical support and advice to providers looking to improve their programs.

The quality of a preschool program depends largely on the training and qualifications of the teacher. Funds for scholarships for those providers seeking to attain associate or baccalaureate degrees and specialized training in early childhood education were included in the Governor's proposal. These opportunities would ensure that teachers in the preschool network have strong competencies for engaging and guiding young learners in multi-faceted areas of growth and development.

Local communities have the responsibility to plan and implement preschool programs that are comprehensive, meeting the school-readiness needs of young children including health, nutrition, and transportation services. Especially since the preschool initiative is targeted to children in low-income working families, effective coordination among a network of public schools, Head Start programs, private child care centers and preschool providers, along with other services, ensures that children arrive at kindergarten healthy and prepared. These "school readiness councils," which may be focused on broad strategies that contribute to a child's success including quality preschool, are facilitated in local communities by grants and technical assistance provided through the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation.

Legislative Results

In the legislative session just concluded, additional funds of approximately $22 million were included for expansion of VPI to at-risk four-year-olds, based on allocation using the free-lunch formula. The FY09 Appropriation Act specifies which of the proposed policy changes will be enacted in the coming biennium: The per pupil rate will increase from $5700 to $6000, taking effect for the 2008-09 school year; and in FY10, there will be a .5 cap on the composite index, which means that the state will pay at least half the per pupil cost for every participating community.

Governor Kaine's commitment to early childhood education mirrors a trend across the country.

Governors in a majority of states have responded to the evidence of positive returns by expanding and strengthening state-funded preschool programs for four-year-olds. Strategies vary among states, depending upon the particular needs and strengths present. Some focus largely on at-risk populations while others promote universal preschool, available on a voluntary basis for all children whose parents choose it. In some states, access is provided to three-year-olds in addition to four-year-olds. While a few states continue to use a public school-only preschool program, the majority promote a mixed-delivery approach, incorporating private providers as part of the preschool system. Financing strategies are varied across the country as well. Preschool is not mandatory in any state.

Over the past century, child care and preschool programs in private homes, centers, and religious facilities have been the main source of preschool services, serving the majority of children whose families have chosen these arrangements for them. While many of these programs have been successful in their purpose, there is a vast diversity of programs, with little method of organization, infrastructure, or accountability to provide strength to the fragmented system.

Forty-four years ago, the federal Head Start program was introduced to provide early learning and support services to children living in poverty. Funding for Head Start three-to five-year old services has leveled off in recent years, limiting the number of children enrolled. The rigors of federal requirements paired with the flexibility commonly given to local communities within state-funded programs have made it a challenge in the past for programs to fully and effectively collaborate. The recent reauthorization of the program holds promise to facilitate partnership and easier integration of programs.

More recently, states have responded to the realization of the fertile ground of early childhood education by launching preschool programs using state funds to extend the opportunity to more children. Integrating these service providers' programs and funding streams is both an opportunity and a challenge for every state. Yet systems that provide high-quality, comprehensive, blended programs allow local communities to meet family needs while maximizing federal, state, and private funds.

As is common in other states, Virginia's landscape includes a broad, fragmented array of child care and preschool programs – both

public and private. Also common is the situation of a broad range of quality – even within each program type. Yet the array of programs brings the advantage of individual distinctions and unique features; there is wisdom in recognizing and maximizing the added value each brings. The Head Start program, for example, provides participating children with an array of support services that are critical in order for them to successfully approach school and life.

Another consideration in planning the Commonwealth's preschool initiative has been the issue of choice for parents. Families should have options for high quality learning environments for their children. These services are not always affordable and do not always provide a full day of services, critical for low-income working families. Sometimes parents may wish to choose a program based not on their child's eligibility by income or circumstance, but on either their perception of quality, convenience, or family needs. While this may present challenges for programs working to meet specific eligibility enrollment, we must work to honor family choice and needs. As well, we must provide clear, meaningful, and supportive information about programs, services, and their quality so that parents may make educated choices as consumers.

At the same time, private child care and preschool programs are small businesses, with a responsibility to maintain sound programming and fiscal integrity.

Head Start Reauthorization

On December 12, 2007 President Bush signed into law the legislation to reauthorize the Head Start Program with the purpose of improving program quality, expanding access, and promoting school readiness for low income children. Reauthorization will enhance cognitive, social and emotional development of children by strengthening the Head Start learning environment and continuing to improve upon the comprehensive services offered to children and families. In the changing preschool environment, Head Start reauthorization focuses on collaboration as a means to expand services and increase program quality for all children in the community.

- Head Start grantees will be required to conduct outreach to the schools and local community partners to enhance school readiness for children. Head Start grantees can take the lead in forming a local school readiness council.

- Head Start reauthorization takes a look at creating an amicable and open communication system between Head Start and the state pre-kindergarten program (VPI). Among the outreach activities, Head Start will be required to work with VPI to help identify eligible preschool children. Regular communication activities will include sharing general information about the Head Start children, professional development opportunities for staff, instructional strategies, and plans for a smooth transition to public school. Reauthorization reexamines ways Head Start can collaborate with the local education agencies to better use both physical and service resources of the community. Collaboration on the use of shared transportation and facilities will be studied along with reducing duplicative services and enhancing services to underserved children.

- One of the most important ways reauthorization will help the collaboration process is through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between local education authorities (LEA) and Head Start grantees. The MOU will enable both Head Start and the LEA to agree upon activities that will ensure all local children and families will have access to a quality preschool program that will meet their needs. The MOU will include plans to collaborate on several key issues: coordinating educational activities, disseminating information about the available programs, prioritizing eligibility criteria, developing service areas, available training opportunities, technical assistance, helping meet the needs of working parents, transition activities, the use of community resources, and other elements to enhance collaboration.

- Head Start reauthorization also broadens eligibility criteria. Currently, Head Start focuses on serving children below the poverty line. If all slots are not filled, Head Start may enroll up to ten percent of the students whose income is above the poverty line. With reauthorization, Head Start may enroll 35 percent of students whose income is below 130 percent of the poverty line if all efforts are exhausted when trying to recruit children living in poverty.

- Professional development is also a focus of reauthorization. By the year 2013, at least 50 percent of Head Start teachers must have a minimum of a baccalaureate degree in early childhood education or a baccalaureate degree with equivalent coursework in early childhood education. Teacher assistants will also be required to have at least a child development associate credential, enrolled in a program leading to an associate or baccalaureate degree, or enrolled in a child development associate credential program. Teachers will be required to attend 15 hours of quality in-service each year.

Opportunities and Challenges

Efforts to expand access to and funding for early childhood education must recognize and be sensitive to the opportunities and economic challenges for this industry.

In Virginia, as in every state, focus on preschool has necessitated an examination of the existing landscape, a consideration of the role of various providers, the need to preserve or increase the quality and stability of those providers, and the benefits of maximizing all funding streams. Competition among programs for enrolling children can be minimized with candid discussion among all interested parties and consensus around a strategic approach for enhancing the school readiness of young children in each community. Such an effort will blend elements of a market-driven approach with other strategies to ensure that families have a real choice of high quality, affordable options.

How do we seize the significant opportunity of vigorous leadership, focus, momentum, and blending potential funding streams to serve more children in high quality settings, maximizing coordination of programs and guarding options for parents, while supporting small business and program stability?

The solution to the preschool puzzle calls for a new, energetic approach to collaboration using innovative strategies and best practices at the federal, state, and local levels.

Solutions
Mobilization of Resource Team   *Replication of Best Practice Strategies*
         Sample Templates for Memoranda of Understanding   *Regional Forums*
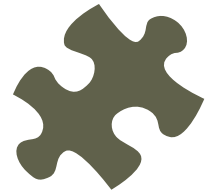
Mobilization of Resource Team

State government agencies have been limited in their capacity to provide staffing and technical assistance for such purposes, though Governor Kaine's proposal would have addressed that situation by adding staff and resources to the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services to assist communities and programs with maximizing their capacity and quality.

Instead, representatives from various constituencies have committed to serve as leaders during this time of transition, supporting communities as they attempt the strategies discussed in this guide. These representatives, working under the leadership of the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives, include the Secretary of Education and his staff and the Secretary of Health and Human Resources and her staff in the Governor's office, the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services and staff, the Superintendent of Public Instruction and staff from the Department of Education, the Head Start State Collaboration Office and its advisory committee, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and its grantees, United Way/Success By 6, leaders among the VPI, Head Start, and private child care communities, and others.

The Resource Team will provide assistance in four ways:

- This guidance document will serve as an introduction to the emerging high-quality early childhood education network envisioned. The guide was written and developed with the assistance of many experts and leaders, all focused on the common goal of ensuring increased access to high quality early childhood education for Virginia's youngest children. By outlining a number of strategies that may be useful to local communities, the guide articulates a clear vision for community participation and benefit.

- As listed in this document by strategy, the resource leaders have agreed to be available by phone or email, as their time allows, addressing specific questions for community leaders working to implement the strategy in their locality. The expertise and knowledge honed by the resource leaders through their experiences may be valuable and instructive for their peers in other communities; both successes and "lessons learned" will be discussed candidly to inform the dialogue.

- A series of regional discussion forums will be presented in April to provide information on the Governor's preschool proposal, legislative action, and on the strategies discussed in this document. The forums will include panels of leaders illustrating the best practice models they've implemented in their communities, and will offer time for questions and answers to address specific details relevant to the region's needs and interests.

- As it is able, the Team will also provide on-site technical assistance to communities working to implement strategies and replicate the best practice models outlined in this guide.

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Replication of Best Practice Strategies

As we move toward implementation of this mixed delivery network, there are a number of best practice strategies that have been identified as helpful for communities. A number of these models are outlined below, along with contact information for localities that have expertise in these strategies and are willing to share information about their experiences.

Pre-K Pilots

The December 2006 initial report of the Start Strong Council included the recommendation to test a number of strategies through a pilot program. The strategies outlined included quality ratings system; blending of programs with different funding streams; delivery in mixed (public and private) sites; and expansion of eligibility using various individual or community risk criteria.

In FY08 only, Appropriation Act language within the VPI item states:

Out of this appropriation, $2,557,266 is provided to the Department of Education to enter into agreements during the 2007-08 school year with school divisions to pilot early childhood development programs. Eligibility shall be limited to those school divisions that have existing partnerships with private and/or non-profit providers as of the 2006-07 school year. School divisions that elect to participate under the pilot shall use the funding to expand the availability of early childhood education programs for at-risk students not served in those school divisions.

Grant instructions were developed for the eligible communities, noting the purpose of the initiative as a feasibility study of strategies for models of high quality preschool network delivery. The pilots were to build on the strengths of existing programs but address the barriers to serving all children. The initiative was to focus on increasing the quality, consistency, and strength of Virginia's preschool network, while increasing access to students who will benefit from the school readiness services.

Twelve communities were identified as eligible; of these only two did not choose to participate. The remaining ten communities submitted successful plans for serving as pilot sites.

The initial evaluation of the pilot initiative, dated December 1, 2007, noted the preliminary results. 265 at-risk pilot children are receiving services in 55 different classrooms or child-care settings. Most (61 percent) are in nonprofit centers and 13 percent are in for-profit centers; 10 percent are in public school settings. Six percent are in a military center; 5 percent in faith-based settings, and 5 percent are home-based family provider settings.
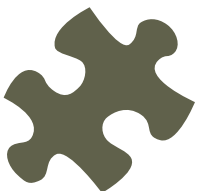
Among the pilots, school readiness councils are braiding funding streams including VPI, subsidy, Head Start, city/county funds, scholarships, foundation funds, parent tuition, and other sources. They are blending VPI, Head Start, and private tuition children in the same classrooms. Many are using a single point of entry for enrollment and emphasizing professional development for preschool staff.

The initial evaluation notes:

Preliminary indicators suggest that the pilot collaboratives are generally well positioned to implement or coordinate public-private preschool delivery and that, by increasing public-private partnerships, they have instrumentally increased their preschool network capacity. Early indicators of program quality are also mostly encouraging. All programs meet the majority of NIEER benchmarks with teacher education and training representing the greatest challenge. Many collaboratives recognize this challenge and are specifically targeting this area for intervention.

(See: http://leg2.state.va.us/dls/h&sdocs.nsf/execsummaryreport/RD3052007)

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School Readiness or Early Childhood Advisory Councils

School readiness councils (sometimes called early childhood advisory councils) can serve as the necessary link among preschool programs and comprehensive service providers in order to complete the preschool puzzle effectively and efficiently at the local level.

A "school readiness council" is a core leadership team in each community, comprised of senior representatives from the school system, local government, Head Start, child care, business, higher education institutions, and varied other constituencies including health, mental health, home visitors, and special education and early intervention specialists. Working together as a team to plan and implement strategies for early childhood development services and programs, school readiness councils can successfully build a sustainable, comprehensive system, maximizing the resources of all partners and sectors.

While there is not a mandatory composition for such a council, the more diverse and broad the council, the more effective the reach and scope may be for the community. School readiness councils can facilitate reaching the most vulnerable parents and families through diverse channels of communication, identifying and forming partnerships with private providers, integrating Head Start with Virginia Preschool Initiative programs, securing and sustaining transportation, wraparound services, physical, mental, and dental health services, and other needed supports. While funds do not necessarily flow through the council, the team practices shared decision-making regarding most strategic use of the funds.

- Any leader, such as the school division superintendent, a business leader, the director of the local department of social services, a non-profit organization, or a Head Start director, may take the lead in forming a school readiness council.
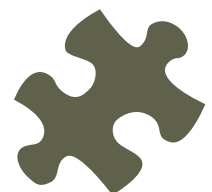
- At the earliest stages, the emerging leadership group should discuss and agree upon a set of principles for the community's early childhood network. With this clear vision in place, the work of the leaders will be more focused.

- Next, the group should conduct an environmental scan of the resources and services currently available, as well as an assessment of need, gaps, and barriers specific to their community.

- Frequently, a funding opportunity may be the impetus needed for a community to form its council. Leadership teams have been a requirement or have formed the basis in local communities for eligibility for Smart Beginnings grants (through the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation), the pre-K pilots (funded through a 2007 General Assembly allocation to the Virginia Preschool Initiative), and the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) demonstration pilots.

Resources:

If communities are considering these strategies, they may benefit from talking with other program leaders who have utilized them. The following representatives are willing to provide guidance:

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Single Point of Entry

Single point of entry is a centralized process through which families can access information to inform their choices and enroll children in a preschool program. As communities establish and enhance collaborative preschool networks made up of VPI, Title I, Early Childhood Special Education, Head Start, and child care centers, a coordinated, centralized process for application offers benefits for families, programs, and communities. A single point of entry facilitates eligibility determinations and timelier placement, and can reduce wait list activity. The strategy tends to maximize public funding streams and offers a more organized method of filling "slots" especially when they are spread over a number of sites.

For parents, single point of entry makes the process of enrolling children easier to navigate, increases awareness of options, and broadens access to additional services families may need. In some localities, a single application portal may be used as an opportunity to collect baseline information on the families and children in their community.

Recent grant opportunities through the Region III Head Start regional office (offered to Head Start programs at the local level) and through the Virginia Department of Education (offered to start-up or expanding VPI programs) have prompted the use of the single-point-of-entry strategy in communities across Virginia. Because there is broad support for a mixed delivery preschool system, single-point-of-entry strategies are particularly timely and relevant as a mechanism for local-level collaboration:

- to inform and educate parents,

- to facilitate partnerships between public and private programs,

- to maximize funding streams, and

- to make the most effective match for each child with an appropriate preschool program, based on child and family characteristics and needs.

As communities consider the strategy, these steps will be addressed:

- In order for collaboration to work, the effort must be supported from all staff and administrators, including division superintendents or city/county administrator and Head Start directors. Building the relationships for collaboration at all levels takes time and patience but is a necessary step in making the system work.

- It is a good practice to have an objective leader coordinating the collaboration process. In some cases, an outside facilitator may lead meetings and articulate a vision for the collaborative effort. A facilitator can keep focus on the goal of creating a unified preschool system for the community.

- Developing a comprehensive understanding of the overall pre-school program, curriculum, and education goals of all cooperating programs helps gain insight and is an important step in creating an infrastructure.

- Promoting and marketing relevant programs and services educates and informs parents of all available services. Printed materials are a good marketing tool to promote the unified preschool system.

- Recruitment and screening should be a joint effort and must include steps to make the process seamless for parents and staff. Developing a joint application and preliminary screening tool enables all programs to match students and families to the program that best meets their needs. It is best to limit the information on the application and compromise on the screening tools used for eligibility into a preschool program.

- A kick-off event or community evening for families helps to promote preschool offerings and encourage registration. At the event, representatives from all programs are present to educate parents and enroll and screen students.

- Program lists and waiting lists are shared and updated regularly.

- Parental preference is very important to the collaboration effort and should be honored whenever possible. It is important to promote services offered by all programs so that parents can make the best possible choice to meet their needs.

Braiding Funds and Blending Programs

There are numerous ways to approach the concept of braiding funds and blending children in classrooms.

- In a classroom, programs may braid Head Start and Virginia Preschool Initiative funds (in addition to other relevant funding streams such as Title I and Early Childhood Special Education) at the administrative level to cover costs, enrolling children at numbers proportionate to what each program provides. The highest quality standards of either program apply; all children receive all services. Both programs accept the fact that even though Head Start's eligibility is 100% FPL (though with Reauthorization, there is flexibility for up to 130%) and local VPI risk criteria may include low English proficiency or other non socio-economic standards or higher threshold of poverty, braiding and blending a classroom with these children is appropriate. Funds from each source must be used for allowable and appropriate purposes as relevant to the funding program. Funds can either be braided by program services (for example, using VPI funds to cover instructional expenses, Head Start funds and federal early childhood special education funds as relevant to cover support services, and child care subsidy funds to cover wraparound services as needed) or by program expenses (for example, paying the lead teacher salary from a funding source separate from that paying the assistant teacher salary).

- In a classroom, a child may receive a 3 hour block of "school readiness services" from VPI (prorated state funds) and another portion of the day from Head Start funds, including the support services. Both the Virginia Department of Education and the Head Start federal representatives have agreed that one child can receive both funding streams as long as the funds provide different services or provide them during different periods of the day. This model particularly helps programs trying to provide a longer school day for working parents. Some programs may also choose to add parent tuition or child care subsidy for wraparound services.

- One program may "pay" another program to provide services (seen as slots) for eligible and funded children. For example, if a VPI classroom has 15 children enrolled through VPI funds, and there are three Head Start-funded children in that community not placed in a classroom, Head Start may purchase preschool services from the VPI program for those three additional children.

- In each case, parent tuition may be included as a funding stream within the classroom as relevant and as permitted by regulation. For example, parents may pay fees for before- and after-school care. If a private program participating in VPI charges tuition higher than the state per-pupil amount, parents may pay the balance to offset the cost, though it is recommended that programs try to ensure that low-income parents are not left with a cost burden that they cannot afford, discouraging their participation. In classrooms that are partially filled by children whose services are covered by public dollars, parents whose children are not eligible for the public programs, but who wish to have access to a high quality preschool, may pay an agreed-upon tuition for their children to participate in the preschool program. Localities may choose a sliding scale or pro-rated fee system for these services.

- It may be helpful to compare the braiding opportunity to the more common practice of braiding special education with Head Start services: If a child qualifies for classroom services under Part B and qualifies income-wise for Head Start and needs full-day services, that child can be dually-enrolled in both special education and Head Start. The educational services are provided by the school system under Part B, then family development, health and wrap-around services are provided by Head Start. In this situation, Head Start does not directly provide the core education services, but monitors and collects information that is required. The school pays for services, staff, classrooms, etc. during that portion of the day, and Head Start pays for the same during the balance of the day. All reporting and other guidelines required by both programs must still be addressed and met.

It is important that providers continue to track the funding streams separately and carefully. If there is any doubt regarding allowability, budget leaders at both programs should be consulted for guidance.

Resources:

If communities are considering these strategies, they may benefit from talking with other program leaders who have utilized them. The following representatives are willing to provide guidance:

Blending VPI/public school and private programs

Valencia Lewis
Hampton City Schools
(757) 727-2447
vlewis@sbo.hampton.k12.va.us

Nancy Taliaferro
Richmond County Public Schools
(804) 333-9322
children@VABB.com

Blending VPI/public school and Head Start programs

Patricia Devitt
Augusta County Schools
(540) 245-5131
pdevitt@augusta.k12.va.us

Andrea Riegel
Augusta County Schools
(540) 245-5164
ariegel@augusta.k12.va.us

Steve Troxell
Shenandoah Valley Consortium for Head Start
(540) 245-5162 x105
stroxell@augusta.k12.va.us

Peggy Harrelson
Hanover County Public Schools Head Start
(804) 365-4506
pharrels@hcps.us

Blending VPI/public school with community-based administrator and Head Start purchase of "slots" in VPI classroom

Amy Hatheway
TAP Head Start
(540) 345-6781, ext. 4407
ahatheway@tapheadstart.org

Mary Jane Mutispaugh
Alleghany County Public Schools
(540) 863-1809
mmutispaugh@alleghany.k12.va.us

Blending VPI/public school with tuition-paying students

David Cox
Superintendent, Culpeper County Public Schools
(540) 825-3677
dcox@culpeperschools.org

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Quality Rating and Improvement System

Virginia's Star Quality Initiative is a ***voluntary*** quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) under development which sets a continuum of clearly defined Star levels of increasing quality. Virginia's Star Quality initiative provides both public and private early childhood programs a roadmap for continuous quality improvement, while participation also gives programs the positive community recognition they deserve for their continued dedication to achieving higher standards and improving quality.

The five standards in the QRIS—education, qualifications and training; interactions; staff to child ratio and group size; learning environment and instructional practices; and partnering with families and communities—have indicators that must be achieved for each Star rating. These standards and indicators have been selected as a result of a thorough review of the research literature and best practices in other states. A strong body of research suggests that early care and education programs that focus on improving in ways aligned with these five standards yield positive outcomes for children.

Virginia's Star Quality has five star levels that incorporate and build upon Virginia's licensing standards. The Star Quality program awards either Rising Star status or one, two, three, four, or five stars to programs, similar to how restaurants and hotels are rated, based on achievement in each of the five standards. No matter what the initial rating may be for a program, participation in the initiative shows parents that the program is focused on quality improvement. This user-friendly rating will be a powerful consumer education tool for parents, informing them about quality as they consider options of child care and preschool programs for their children.

When implemented, programs are to be assessed biennially by trained and experienced Star Quality Raters, who will be regularly rated themselves for consistency and reliability. Thorough and systematic on-site visits will be conducted to determine which star level designation a facility will receive and to insure consistency among programs, providing improved information and accountability.
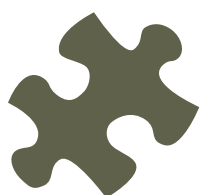
While in time, the initiative will rate infant and toddler classrooms as well as family provider settings, the QRIS currently focuses on field-testing in three- and four-year old center-based classrooms, such as VPI and Head Start classrooms, and child care and preschool programs in private centers and religious facilities delivering preschool services for these ages.

The proposed budget included funding that would have covered the rating costs for 525 classrooms in 2009 and 1150 in 2010. In addition, the proposal called for funds to cover

half the annual cost of providing a mentor in each program to assist with continuous quality improvement. A grant fund would provide, on a competitive basis, resources to cover costs for quality improvement such as curriculum, books, and other classroom materials for the participating programs. If funding is secured, interested programs will have the opportunity to apply for participation in the QRIS initiative. Initially, preference would be given to those applicants serving low-income children, those working to establish a partnership with their local school system to deliver pre-K services, and those who display capacity for serving additional four-year-olds.

Importantly, the Governor's proposal sought funds not only for the QRIS initiative, but also for scholarships for early childhood professionals seeking to attain associate and baccalaureate degrees and specialized training in early childhood education. Teachers and providers in Head Start, private centers, and other programs participating in the QRIS would have had priority access to these scholarship funds.

It is envisioned that in time, all state-funded classrooms in both public and private settings, would be assessed and rated using the QRIS standard. As VPI grantees expand the public-private partnerships in their communities, interested new partners would have the opportunity to show their program's eligibility for participation by achieving a certain quality level on the QRIS.

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Transition Practices

Early care and education alone is not a guarantee of school readiness and academic success. Rather, it is the foundation of a system of ready families, schools, and communities where children are continuously supported in their growth and development. This system facilitates children's adjustment to new settings by fostering the skills to adapt to the significant differences in learning environment, teaching styles, and parental involvement between early education programs and elementary schools.

Early learning programs of all types ideally work together with families and schools to form a seamless continuum of care and education for children. An effective transition process, from home to child care to preschool and into the formal school system, is vital in order to maintain and build upon the cognitive and developmental gains children experience from early care and education. Early intervention research has shown that the benefits of early childhood education may fade; however, results from the National Head Start Demonstration evaluation have also shown that effective transition practices at the local level can mitigate this decline.

Effective transition practices engage many stakeholders to form a web of support for children, including families, early childhood and elementary school teachers and administrators, other providers of services for families and children, and community groups. Connections between programs and families are especially critical, and include parents' participation in the classroom, frequent and effective two-way communication, preparation and distribution of home-learning activities, and opportunities to make contributions to the learning setting in ways supportive of a child's home environment, language, and culture. Efforts to connect with families should be used appropriately and should vary in intensity, from low-key flyers and websites to parent conferences and home visits requiring more personal contact. Parents can also be engaged and made aware of child transitions through local parent-teacher associations and parent support groups, creating connections between new families and families with children already enrolled in child care, preschool, or elementary school.
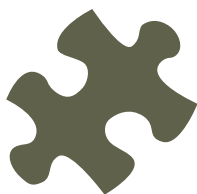
Transition practices should be a priority not only for early care and education providers, but also for elementary school teachers and administrators. Early childhood education and elementary school professionals may collaborate to engage families by:

- designating a transition coordinator to direct efforts to partner with families and bring together a transition team with representatives from preschools, elementary schools, other child and family services, parent groups, and other community organizations;

- promoting kindergarten visitation days;

- sponsoring transition to kindergarten community workshops to inform parents, which could be led by early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers;

- hosting health and education fairs in the community for families with young children, with a focus on transition to or from preschool;

- organizing a series of parent education workshops co-sponsored by early childhood providers and school divisions with presentations on child development and other relevant topics

- providing information and materials to reach out to families, particularly at-risk families, including information on kindergarten registration events;

- distributing a parent/child learning package to families registering a child for kindergarten

- coordinating staffs to meet with each other and share information on child assessments and individual student development and progress; and

- encouraging or providing joint training for all professionals involved in children's transition to school.

Schools with proactive transition plans start reaching out to parents before the first day of kindergarten; these links are established before the child arrives in the classroom and are sustained as he or she progresses to higher grades, creating strong, lasting family-school partnerships.

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Samples of Memoranda of Understanding

As communities consider some of the braiding and blending opportunities described in this document, it may be helpful to review samples of memoranda of understanding or agreements used to outline expectations and responsibilities of relevant program partners. While there are a variety of ways that programs collaborate, the following templates show how general agreements can be described. These templates are presented here as examples and should not be construed as legal documents; each locality must utilize a format that is aligned with their mutual agreements and their own legal, finance, and program advisors.

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING*
BETWEEN
JEFFERSON COUNTY (GOVERNMENT or PUBLIC SCHOOLS)
AND
ABC PRESCHOOL

As a function of the collaboration between Jefferson County and ABC Preschool in the provision of preschool services to expand opportunities to four-year-old children, the following conditions are set forth:

1. ABC Preschool agrees to provide preschool services for eligible students who reside in Jefferson County. The services will be non-religious in nature and will meet the requirements of Virginia Preschool Initiative, including a curriculum aligned with the Foundation Blocks for Early Learning, unless specifically authorized by the Department of Education to waive a current requirement

2. Eligible students are those identified as having risk factors that could be barriers to being successful in school. Locally developed risk criteria will be used to determine eligibility, as approved by the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) Grant and as administered by Jefferson County's preschool program.

3. Transportation to and from the program is the responsibility of the parent.

4. Jefferson County will reimburse ABC Preschool $xxxx for each child for a full day program. This sum includes the state's share of $xxxx per child plus $xxxx per child of local share funds.

5. ABC Preschool staff will be invited to appropriate staff development opportunities as offered by Jefferson County's preschool program.

6. VPI-funded students enrolled at ABC Preschool will receive comprehensive services, including medical, dental, social and family support, through Jefferson County's preschool program, as needed.

7. VPI students enrolled in ABC Preschool will participate in the state pre-literacy screening initiative (PALS-PreK).

8. Jefferson County reserves the right to have announced or unannounced visits to the ABC Preschool while the students are in attendance.

9. A system of communicating information concerning the student will be developed jointly by representatives of Jefferson County and ABC Preschool.

10. The County's preschool program coordinator or designee and the designee of the ABC Preschool will be responsible for monitoring this agreement.

This Memorandum of Understanding will be effective for the xxxx school year.

_____   _____
Signature   Title   Date
Representative of Jefferson County

_____   _____
Signature   Title   Date
Representative of ABC Preschool

* (This MOU is not a legally binding document. It creates no legal obligations on the part of the School Division or School Board. It is intended to specify the expectations of the parties involved in providing preschool services according to Virginia Department of Education VPI program guidelines).

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MASON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PRESCHOOL INITIATIVE
Funded through Head Start and VPI

ADMINISTRATION AGREEMENT
For Coordination of Funding between
Head Start and Virginia Preschool Initiative

As the grantee for Head Start in Mason County, the Mason County Public Schools School Board agrees to direct state Virginia Preschool Initiative funding to be coordinated with federal Head Start funding to serve at-risk preschool students using the Head Start model. The Board also agrees to comply with both federal and state regulations attached to the funding sources.

The school division agrees to:

• Provide the highest quality early childhood services by operating all early childhood program classrooms using Head Start and VPI funding under the Head Start Performance Standards and complying with all Head Start regulations.

• Establish compatible eligibility and selection criteria for program entrance.

• Coordinate funding from both sources in an equitable manner and in compliance with all applicable federal and state regulations and program standards to serve the maximum number of at-risk preschool children possible.

In the coordinated funding model where XXX children will be served, an equitable exchange of services (education and family) is provided through this model:

Head Start will fund the salary and benefits of teachers and aides for XX children (X classrooms), the salary and benefits for X family services specialists and XX portion of the Coordinator of Program Services' salary.   Remaining Head Start funds will be used to support program activities.

VPI will fund the salary and benefits costs of the teachers and aides for XX children (X classrooms) and XX portion of the salary of the Coordinator of Program Services.

This agreement shall be reviewed and updated annually by signature of the designees.

Agreeing Parties:

_____   _____
Superintendent of Schools   Date

_____   _____
Early Childhood/Head Start Director   Date

Blue Skies County Contractual Working Agreement for

Blended Preschool Programs

- The maximum number of children in the blended class will be 25 in two classrooms.
- The staffing pattern will be determined by the Education Coordinator and Special Education Director. (Example two teachers, one teaching assistant; two teachers, two teaching assistants; one teacher, two teaching assistants). Any change in the design will be approved by the Head Start Policy Council.
- All children will have up to date immunizations and have a yearly physical.
- Children who are federally funded will have a dental exam and follow up if needed. All attempts will be made for all enrolled children to have a dental screening and/or exam.
- All children will have a completed application.
- The program will offer instruction five days a week for the full school day. When it is determined that it is in the child's best interest the school day will be adjusted.
- Two home visits and two parent conferences will be conducted through out the school year. Home Visits will be conducted by both classroom teachers with all children. Both teachers will also be in attendance for Parent Conferences. All attempts will be made for both teachers to conduct parent conferences and home visits through out the school year. The schedule of parent conferences and home visits approved by the consortium will be followed by the classroom staff.
- All required paperwork will be the responsibility of both teachers.
- The schedule of one Friday per month with no children attending will be followed for the class to allow for staff development. (Please note that VPI requires a minimum of 180 days of services.)
- xxxx will be used as the initial school screening instrument and both staff members will conduct screenings.
- Both teachers will be invited to attend IEP meetings.
- The classroom curriculum will be xxxx and supplemented by xxxx.
- The preschool class will be called the school name with preschool after it.
- All children will have their performance measured by the xxxx and results will be entered into the CC.net. All children will also be given the PALS-PreK. The NRS will be given to appropriate federally funded children.
- The cost of both teachers/teaching assistants to attend appropriate trainings will be assigned to Head Start and/or Special Education depending on the topic of the training and who employees the staff.
- A classroom budget to cover activities and supplies will be split between Head Start and Special Education based on enrollment.
- The cost of the CC.net for children who are not federally funded will be paid by the local school division.
- All Head Start Standards will be implemented by all classroom instructional personnel.
- Core team meetings will be conducted on a regular basis and will include teachers, appropriate special education staff, appropriate Head Start staff and the principal.
- The teachers will plan together and the cost of this planning will be paid by the program that employs the teacher.
- The Head Start Education Coordinator and the site Principal will jointly evaluate Teachers and Teaching Assistants.
- All families who have a child in the classroom will be included in Center Meetings.
- Children who do not qualify for free/reduced lunch or who are not enrolled in Head Start, will pack or pay for their own lunch and breakfast (unless local nutrition programs are open to all students).
- Lunch will be in the classroom, family style.
- School fees will not be charged.
- All support services for children who have disabilities will be provided in the classroom individually or in small groups that include children with or without disabilities.
- The staff in each classroom will work as a team to meet the needs of all children.
- The classroom staff will follow procedures outlined in the Preschool Manual that is developed by both Head Start and the school division.
- The enrollment of children in the classroom will reflect all funding sources available.

_____

School Division Superintendent   Date

_____

Special Education Director   Date

_____

Head Start Director   Date

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Regional Discussions

Regional forums will be held in April to provide information on the Governor's proposal, legislative and budget action, and best practice strategies for community planning and service delivery. Led by the Executive Director of the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives and hosted in partnership with United Way Success By 6, the forums will provide the latest information on the VPI initiative and state-level policy and program activities, and will provide opportunities for regions to share information and best practices with each other.

It is suggested that the following individuals from the state and/or each locality be represented at the regional forums: Superintendents or Assistant Superintendents for Instruction, school division finance staff, Principals, VPI Coordinators, Head Start Directors, Head Start Technical Assistance staff, Head Start Collaboration Director, Head Start Association staff and officers and Directors Council leaders, directors of local departments of social services, child care association representatives, private school and child care representatives, child care resource and referral, Child Day Care Council members, Start Strong Council members, local council or coalition leaders, community action leaders, pre-K pilot leaders, QRIS demonstration leaders, single point of entry grantees, higher education early childhood representatives from 4-year and community colleges, VECF grantees, VECF board members, Board of Education and Social Services members, and agency staff.

Dates, times, and locations of the forums are as follows:

RICHMOND : April 2
United Way of Greater Richmond & Petersburg – 2001 Maywill St., Richmond, VA 23230
Contact Barbara Couto Sipe: (804) 771-5869 or coutob@yourunitedway.org

SOUTH HAMPTON ROADS : April 3
United Way of South Hampton Roads – 2515 Walmer Ave., Norfolk, VA 23513
Contact Lisa Howard: (757) 226-8826 or lhoward@smartbeginningsshr.org

ALEXANDRIA : April 7
The Campagna Center – 418 S. Washington St., Alexandria 22314
Contact Carol Farrell: (703) 838-0785 or carol.farrell@alexandriava.gov

HARRISONBURG : April 9
Massanutten Regional Library – 174 S. Main St., Harrisonburg, VA 22801
Contact Pat Kennedy: (540) 568-2557 or kennedpa@jmu.edu

MARTINSVILLE : April 10
Virginia Museum of Natural History – 21 Starling Ave., Martinsville, VA 24112
Contact Sheryl Agee: (276) 638-3946 or sheryl.agee@unitedway.org

ABINGDON : April 15
People Incorporated of Southwest Virginia – 1173 W. Main, Abingdon, VA 24210
Contact Bryan Phipps: (276) 619-2256 or bphipps@peopleinc.net

ROANOKE : April 16
Roanoke Higher Education Center, Room 212 – 108 N. Jefferson St., Roanoke, VA 24016
Contact Abby Verdillo: (540) 777-4206 or abby@uwrv.org
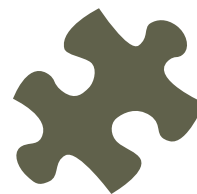
For more information about the regional forums, contact **Kathy Glazer** at Kathy.glazer@governor.virginia.gov.

Additional Resources

Start Strong Council Initial Report
http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/StartStrong/StartStrong-InitialReport.pdf

Start Strong Council Final Report
http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/StartStrong/StartStrongReportFinal.pdf

JLARC: Virginia Preschool Initiative: Current Implementation and Potential Changes
http://jlarc.state.va.us/Reports/Rpt364.pdf

Initial Evaluation of Pre-K Pilot Initiative
http://leg2.state.va.us/dls/h&sdocs.nsf/By+Year/RD3052007/$file/RD305.pdf

Department of Education Foundation Blocks
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Elem_M/FoundationBlocks.pdf

Milestones of Early Childhood Development
http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/cc/publications.cgi

Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals
http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/cc/publications.cgi

Early Childhood Professional Career Lattice
http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/cc/career_lattice.pdf

Virginia's Definition of School Readiness
http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/Virginia_Definition_of_School_Readiness.doc

Virginia's Quality Rating and Improvement System
http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/EarlyChildhood/GovWorkingGroup.cfm

Articulation Agreements between Community Colleges and 4-year Institutions
http://myfuture.vccs.edu/Students/EarlyChildhoodTransfer/tabid/588/Default.aspx

Department of Education Curriculum Review Rubric
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Elem_M/preschool_rubric.pdf

For additional copies or information, contact:

Kathy Glazer
Executive Director,
Governor's Working Group on
Early Childhood Initiatives

804-371-4018
Kathy.glazer@governor.virginia.gov.